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Statement on Film Preservation

by Leonard Maltin

Film preservation should be of interest to everyone---from the average film fan to the most erudite scholar. We cannot allow such a significant part of our history to vanish.

The idea that even newsreels--the most precious documents imaginable--are still on the endangered list, is shocking. When I broadcast a story about the Hearst-Metrotone Newsreel library held by UCLA, and mentioned that funding was needed to preserve it, several organizations and individuals came forward with contributions. They felt, as I do, that it would be unthinkable to allow these films to vanish from our midst.

I have worked with most of the country's major archives, and even put in some time on the staff at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I've seen how these institutions, staffed by enthusiastic, underpaid film scholars, go begging for money simply to survive. And I've seen the list of films waiting to be preserved---waiting year after year on a priority list, while they literally crumble into dust.

Is this how future generations will remember us? As the people who paid lip service to the notion of Film as Art, or Film as a mirror of popular culture--but stood by while portions of film history disintegrated? I hope not.

Nor should we allow the films we preserve to be hoarded. Most people have no knowledge of film archives, or the need for film

preservation. But home video has given them unprecedented access to thousands of films. And with that access has come an impatience over the fact that thousands more are not available.

The questions most often posed to me are, "Where can I find that film?" and "Why can't I see that film?"

Most of the people who pose these questions are average citizens who happen to like movies and want to see a particular favorite again. Sometimes, there is a more specific purpose: an author writing a book, or a scholar trying to complete a study.

Are we to tell these people that the film they seek was allowed to rot? Or that even though the movie was shown in public--the equivalent to publishing a book---it was allowed to be ferreted away thereafter, and never made public again?

Preservation should be our paramount concern. Making the films we preserve available to the public should go hand-in-hand with that process. Just as inter-library loans, and microfiche publications, make books available to readers and scholars around the country, so it should be with our film treasures. Perhaps as we round the corner into the 21st century we can make that a reality: a country so proud of its film heritage that it wants a student in Tempe, Arizona or Fargo, North Dakota to have the same chance to see a great silent film--projected on a screen--that his counterpart in Rochester, New York already enjoys

I consider myself lucky. I grew up in and around New York City, and as my interest in movie history solidified, I spent

countless hours at revival theaters and at the Museum of Modern Art, where I got my basic training. When I started to publish books on aspects of film history, I received plaintive letters from readers around the country yearning to see the films I'd described. I could only commiserate with them and encourage them to come to New York.

In this age of high-tech communications, that answer seems more inadequate than ever. But the answer does require money, and I hope Congress will recognize the importance of this goal. American movies belong to all of us--or at least, they should.